

Ornamental grasses a visual impact on landscapes

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

A quiet revolution of sorts has been gradually taking place during the last few years. Wildflowers and native plants became vogue, and formal, squared-off landscape designs gave way to more naturalistic curves and flowing lines.

One of the newest trends in landscape design and plant materials is the use of ornamental grasses in the landscape. More than ever before, gardeners are realizing the fine accent and architectural effect this group of plants contributes to a garden.

As one applies the principles of good design — repetition, variety, balance, emphasis, sequence and scale — along with the design qualities of color, texture, line and form, one appreciates the many uses and functions of ornamental grasses.

This trend follows along with the continued exploding popularity of perennial flowering plants. Besides bamboo — a grass that knows no bounds — and pampas grass, a huge, billowy, sharp-edged grass with attractive white plumes, ornamental grasses have been relatively ignored in American landscapes.

Not so in Europe, where for years many different types of grasses have been finding homes in landscapes and where there are many nurseries devoted solely to the culture of grasses. Landscape architects on both sides of the

ocean have long used grasses for their striking architectural qualities and rhythm, but gardeners have been slower to adopt the widespread use of grass for the landscape design.

In part, this might be because we're so used to thinking of landscape plants as round to oval to even squared-off balls of green matter. Grass, after all, is what we walk on and is so commonly seen in meadows and pastures in the countryside.

Ornamental grasses make very striking accents, and thus it might be more difficult to imagine using them in a more formal landscape setting. But use of ornamental grasses is increasing, and more varieties are available.

Not only do ornamental grasses look attractive in the

landscape, but they are very easy to grow, hardy and many make excellent cutting plants for flower arrangements. The striking architectural forms of ornamental grasses are so bold they naturally draw the eye.

Ornamental grasses can provide height, color, contrast, wildlife shelter, spiky accents, feathery waves, and low-growing clumps to gardens and landscapes. They can be grown in beds or in pots. Many grasses retain their shape and foliage structure through the winter, giving added texture to the garden.

Ornamental grasses provide a natural transition from formal plantings around the home to less formal surroundings of the native landscape. Ornamental grasses can be arranged in masses as you would shrubbery or flower



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Graceful, flowing plumes produced by purple fountain grass make it one of the most popular ornamental grasses.



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borders. Blend and weave with wildflowers to intensify seasonal transitions. Plant them in containers and use them as you would potted flowers or foliage on the deck or terrace.

Ornamental grasses come in an amazingly broad assortment of colors, sizes and forms. They also come in a variety of hues ranging from burgundy, red, yellow and green and their growth characteristics are just as varied, with some hugging the ground at six inches while others can tower several feet toward the sky. They can billow out, weep over gracefully or stand upright in a tight, perky clump.

While ornamental grasses have to add beauty to the garden to justify their space and care, they have the added bonus of being very low maintenance and very insect and disease free. Best of all, while the lawn needs to be mowed weekly, ornamental grasses need little care to look great — no weekly mowing here.

Ornamental grasses can be used in the landscape just like perennials, but their usefulness extends far beyond that of a normal perennial. With ornamental grasses, looks aren't everything — they can add the dimensions of sound and movement to the garden as wind catches and rustles the leaves. The gentle waving motion of the grasses and the accompanying sounds, create a very peaceful atmosphere within your garden.

Ornamental grasses add an air of elegance and character to a yard. Whether it is included in elaborate landscaping or nestled among garden flowers, it is sure to add a special flair to the surroundings. Ornamental grasses can add lasting beauty, and provide a wonderful asset to the home landscape.

Now is the time to select and plant ornamental grasses in your landscape and enjoy their graceful upright foliage and delicate flower plumes during the coming

year.

Just about any ornamental grass will add fall and winter interest to the landscape as the foliage goes dormant and the plumes dry.

And if that doesn't provide enough incentive, be sure to make a notation on your gardening calendar to attend the Galveston County Master Gardener volunteers' Ornamental and Perennial Plant Sale on Oct. 6, at the Wayne Johnson Community Center in Carbine Park, 4102 FM 519, in La Marque. There will be a wide array of adapted landscape plants will be for sale including a limited selection of ornamental grasses.

A presale seminar also will be conducted Sept. 29, at the Wayne Johnson Community Center from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Heidi Sheesley of TreeSearch Farms will provide a preview of plants to be available at this year's sale.

